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PP RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHCHI #0177/01 3300231
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 250231Z NOV 08
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0899
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0975

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NSC FOR PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/25/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#) [MY](#)
SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: DEMISE OF SECRET PEACE DIALOGUE
CONFIRMED BY RTG CONTACT

REF: A. BANGKOK 3220 (RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND NEW IDEAS)
[1](#)B. CHIANG MAI 120 (IMPLEMENTATION STALLED)
[1](#)C. CHIANG MAI 154 (CHAVALIT FOLDS; WHO'S DEALING NOW?)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, CG, ConGen, Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary and Comment

[1](#)1. (S) Mark Tamthai, the RTG's point-man for secret talks with southern insurgents, confirmed to visiting DCM that the RTG committee charged with running the dialogue has now been disbanded following several months of inaction due to a funding cut-off. The ensuing vacuum remains unfilled, despite various churning in the form of separate (but ineffectual) dialogue tracks, Tamthai's tentative steps to keep the peace process alive by engaging locally with the RTA Fourth Army Commander, and the Henri Dunant Centre's efforts to bring Thai parliamentarians and civil society leaders into the process. With no near-term resumption in sight and none expected until the country's protracted political crisis is resolved, Tamthai looked ahead toward two related challenges. One is finding the right legal framework for an eventual solution; Tamthai advocates granting Bangkok-like administrative status to the three southern provinces (elected governor and self-administration of schools). The other is building a cadre of qualified local Muslims to run the growing number of socio-economic development projects in the South.

[1](#)2. (S) Comment: The peace process is stalled, but at least for now is not moving backward - interlocutors in southern Thailand assert that the situation in the South has improved recently (Ref A). But the stalemate is precarious, and with political crisis in Bangkok overshadowing the unrest in the South, a flare-up could easily be ignited by insurgents looking to get back in the headlines or security forces cracking down injudiciously. End Summary and Comment.

Secret Dialogue Dead For Now

[1](#)3. (S) DCM and CG met November 21 in Chiang Mai with Mark Tamthai, Director of Payap University's Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace and point-man for the RTG's secret dialogue

with southern insurgents. Tamthai confirmed to us what had become increasingly obvious: the National Security Council committee charged with running the secret dialogue has been officially disbanded, and funding for conducting the talks has been frozen for months. As he has told us before, Tamthai traced the demise of the secret dialogue to lack of direction "at the top" since interim, coup-appointed Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont left office early this year.

14. (S) Tamthai did not say whether the demise of the secret dialogue was a conscious decision by the RTG (though in the past he has fingered NSC Secretary General Surapon Puanaiyaka as a devout enemy of the peace process). Tamthai said "some people" in key positions prefer a hardline, military-only solution to the southern insurgency, and that "the people in charge now" have long held the view that Muslims cannot be trusted for any kind of power-sharing or autonomous development authority. There is also a prevailing sense in the RTG security apparatus not to continue any of the policies of the coup-appointed government of 2006-08.

Trying to Fill the Vacuum

15. (S) Tamthai said his efforts to try to keep threads of the secret dialogue alive were largely ineffectual given his lack of both funding and mandate. His last few meetings with insurgent leaders (Ref B) were informal due to non-participation by RTG government and security officials. Tamthai has considered developing an "unofficial mandate" by partnering locally with RTA Fourth Army Commander Pichet Wisaichorn, but doing so would require him to conceal the budget from NSC SYG Surapon, which he is uncomfortable doing. "Change in Bangkok will have to come first" before the peace process could realistically be revived, Tamthai concluded.

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16. (S) Meanwhile, other players churn in place, Tamthai said:

-- the Henri Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC), which has facilitated the secret talks, has sought to broaden the peace process discussion by expanding it to include select Parliamentarians and civil society leaders. But HDC has met with little success since its attempt runs counter to the RTG's position against talks.

-- Tamthai's various insurgent interlocutors (exiles living outside of Thailand) are trying to consolidate, in hopes of strengthening themselves for dialogue by speaking with one voice. But the RTA is wary, seeing consolidation as a strengthening of the enemy.

-- in the absence of RTG-insurgent dialogue, numerous other tracks have popped up, further confusing the state of play (Ref C).

Prime Ministers Past and Present

17. (S) As he has before, Tamthai expressed regret that former PM Surayud, who had created and chaired the now-disbanded NSC committee on the South, no longer has a leading role in guiding the peace process. Having returned to his previous position on the King's Privy Council, Surayud cannot speak openly about the southern insurgency. According to Tamthai, Surayud still believes strongly that dialogue is a required element for achieving peace. As for current PM Somchai Wongsawat - clearly preoccupied with the country's ongoing domestic political crisis - Tamthai believes he has yet to shape his own view about the insurgency. In the meantime, having no background inside Thailand's security apparatus, Somchai will continue to defer to the military leadership on the southern issue. Tamthai did add, however, that during Somchai's earlier stint as Permanent

Secretary in the Ministry of Justice, he was supportive (though not at the forefront) of the Ministry's initiatives for judicial reform in the South.

Looking for the Right Formula

18. (S) If a permanent solution were to require some kind of special status, or autonomy, for the three southern provinces, DCM asked, would the rest of the country accept that? Tamthai said such a formula might work if the provinces were not Muslim, but the religious angle made it a tough sell, especially among the security apparatus. Tamthai then argued that a potentially workable solution would be simply to grant the three provinces (either singly or as a new whole) the same status currently enjoyed by metropolitan Bangkok under the current Constitution; e.g., an elected governor and self-administration of local schools (outside the nation's centralized Ministry of Education system). At Tamthai's last meeting with insurgent leaders, there was consensus that this formula -- devolution of power within existing Constitutional law, not the creation of a new autonomous status -- could work. However, when Tamthai later broached the concept in RTG security circles he was rebuffed. The general vibe he got from security circles was that a Bangkok-like formula for the South would be asking for trouble, and a first step toward "something else."

19. (S) Tamthai went on to explain that Thailand's Malay Muslims see themselves as a community, not a nation. Using a sports analogy to illustrate, he said that, in a soccer match between the Thai and Malaysian national teams, they would root for Thailand. Yet in a match pitting club teams from Bangkok and Kelantan (a state in northern Malaysia), they would root for Kelantan, with whom they share a dialect and sense of community. Moreover, the exile insurgent leaders Tamthai meets with are not interested in obtaining Malaysian citizenship, and take offense when, for example, the Thai Embassy in Damascus treats Thai students studying in Syria (of which there is a significant number, according to Tamthai) as "non-Thais."

Development Funding Plentiful, But Human Resources Lacking

10. (S) DCM noted that while the USG wished to see Thailand,
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one of our closest allies, resolve the southern situation, we did not see a direct role for us. Tamthai agreed. DCM then asked whether the USG could usefully fund development projects or other activities in the South, given the plethora of organizations already involved. Tamthai replied that, while he would never say there was enough funding, it was not hard to find. Rather the difficulty is finding qualified local Muslims to administer the development projects. There is not only a shortage of trained and educated locals, but also an atmosphere of suspicion about the motives of the projects that makes some local Muslims keep their distance. As a result, many development organizations bring in Thai Muslims from outside the South area to run the projects, but the locals dismiss them as outsiders.

11. (U) DCM cleared this cable.
MORROW